Language, Culture and Identity in African Migrant Narratives in South Africa: Interpreting and Performing South Africanness

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Drawing from in-depth qualitative data in the form of migrant narratives and semi-structure interviews with migrants from various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the presentation reports on a study that focused on processes of identity construction by exploring strategies used by migrants in identifying and distancing themselves from their migrant status in a context characterized by intense xenophobic violence. I will argue in this presentation that while it is taken as axiomatic that South Africans have not shied away from using demeaning and dehumanizing terminology in describing migrants and in some instances unleashed unimaginable violence to drive African foreign migrants out of ‘their’ country, migrants too have not been immune to engaging in processes of othering and describing South Africans in zoomorphic terms, migrants have engaged in strategic attempts to conceal their ‘foreignness’ by interpreting and ‘performing’ what they perceive to be a South African black identity through embodiment, language choice and practices of colorism. The irony in the migrant’s performance of what they perceive to be a South African identity is that, in their view, there is a single monochrome ethnic, racial and cultural identity identifiable as South African whereas in attempting to perform this identity, migrants negotiate multiple identities by constructing multiple selves. The irony lies in the fact that while migrants construct multiple identities commensurate with the multiple spaces they operate in, South African plural identities are reduced to a singularity in plurality. More importantly, this imagined South Africanness, as an identity, becomes a lived practice wherein there is no permanency or any foundation of the self. The lived experience speaks directly to linguistic and/or cultural identity as a set of self-conscious choices. In terms of identity making processes, the multiple selves suggest that there may, in fact, be no fixed continuum between different linguistic identities but rather a vast array of choices making up myriad linguistic identities some real, some imagined and performed.